

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A1NEW YORK TIMES
1 April 1987

Rebels Kill 43 Salvador Troops and U.S. Adviser

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Special to The New York Times

EL PARAISO, El Salvador, March 31 — Leftist guerrillas severely damaged a key army base here this morning, killing at least 43 Salvadoran soldiers and a United States military adviser, the first to die in combat in El Salvador.

The rebels lost eight dead in what appeared to be their most important and successful operation in recent years. The army base of El Paraíso was a smoking ruin of rubble strewn with the bloody evidence of violent death.

The Chief of Staff of the Salvadoran Army, Gen. Adolfo O. Blandon, said that in addition to the 43 killed, 35 soldiers were wounded. He said the casualty figure may rise, and other reliable military sources said it could be considerably higher.

Most of Garrison Was Gone

The base normally has a garrison of about 1,000 troops, but at the time of the attack, only about 250 were there, Salvadoran officials said. They said the rest were out on operations.

The Pentagon identified the dead American adviser as Staff Sgt. Gregory A. Fronius, 27 years old, from Greensburg, Pa., a member of the Army Special Forces. He was said to have arrived in El Salvador three months ago.

In Washington, a Pentagon spokesman said Sergeant Fronius was the only American adviser on the base at the time of the attack. He was part of a two-member team, but the other adviser was elsewhere in El Salvador and was not hurt.

A Rebel Resurgence

The attack by the guerrillas of the Marxist-led Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, which claimed responsibility, was seen as a humiliation for the American-trained Salvadoran Army and the Government. It comes at a time when the rebels are showing a marked resurgence of military and political activity.

This was the second time in four years that the rebels had largely destroyed the base, one of the army's most important and highly defended posts. It is 36 miles north of the capital, San Salvador, on the edge of a major battle zone. The base was designed, by American Special Forces advisers in 1982, to be impregnable.

The Salvadoran Army has received almost \$1 billion in American military aid, four years of training and tons of the latest military equipment, but American military officers say its performance remains substandard, allowing the guerrillas to survive as a potent force that probably will not triumph but that is likely to continue to severely test the Government.

During a visit to the battle site early today a reporter was shown where the American adviser had died a few hours before.

It appeared that Sergeant Fronius was hit directly by a rocket or mortar round as he scrambled from his barracks during the lightning rebel attack. The assault began in the pre-dawn darkness, at 2 A.M., and ended two and a half hours later.

The dead adviser was the sixth American soldier killed by the rebels in El Salvador since 1983. Another adviser was assassinated while driving his car four years ago and four marines were machine-gunned while eating at an outdoor cafe in 1985.

A Central Intelligence Agency employee died last week in the crash of a Salvadoran military helicopter, according to a spokesman for the American Embassy.

There are usually more than 100 American soldiers in El Salvador, of whom 55 are officially defined as military advisers, according to an American Embassy spokesman. The advisers are stationed in several outlying army bases and a number have narrowly avoided being killed in two previous rebel attacks in the last two years.

The advisers are allowed to carry a weapon, but they are not supposed to go on combat missions and are required to exercise "good judgement" in not placing themselves in danger, according to the embassy spokesman.

Claim by Rebel Radio

In practice, however, American advisers have often gone on combat patrols, where they have been seen by reporters. The embassy spokesman said there had been no indication that the rebels had the capacity to overrun the base at El Paraíso.

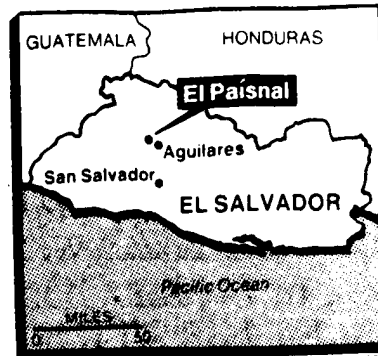
The rebel radio, Venceremos, this morning said the attack marked the beginning of a new military campaign "for the conquest of peace, bread, work and liberty — all the people prepare their weapons."

The attackers appear to have concentrated, with almost complete success, on destroying the administrative offices, officers quarters and intelligence center at the base — all of which were gutted and burned during the attack. Several other buildings remained standing but were holed by shellfire and bullets.

"The intent of the terrorists was to seek out the command centers of the brigade," General Blandon said as he toured the scene today.

Trails of blood left by the wounded and dying etched the dry-season dust, and the pulverized bodies of soldiers hit by rocket fire dotted broken buildings and shrapnel-scarred trees.

In one shattered barracks tired soldiers stuffed the charred and broken



Assault was aimed at army garrison based at El Paraíso.

bodies of dozens of their fellows into clear plastic bags. A perforated boot lay in a path, filled with blood. Discarded uniforms and red-stained bandages were strewn across inner courtyards cratered by rocket and mortar rounds.

In one corner soldiers stood over the bodies of eight guerrillas killed inside the compound. As a reporter approached, a soldier reached into the torn chest of one dead rebel, pulled out the exposed heart for a moment and then dropped it back into the body.

One soldier said the dead rebels included the cousin of a soldier on the base. General Blandon said he suspected some of the attackers were rebels who had infiltrated the army in order to gather intelligence for the attack.

Commander Survived

While at least 43 enlisted men died in the attack, no Salvadoran officer was killed. The guerrillas claimed to have killed the commander of the base, Col. Gilberto Rubio, but he was only lightly wounded in the attack.

Three soldiers indirectly criticized their officers, saying there was little exercise of authority or coordination of defenses in the first hour of the attack.

The operation appeared to have been carried out by an elite rebel force that knew exactly what it was doing. It was similar to other rebel attacks in the last two years in which highly trained rebel units of about 100 men hit key army bases in quick night operations designed to end before helicopter gunships could counterattack.

The rebels rained highly accurate mortar fire and rockets on the center of the base, pitting the main buildings and setting them ablaze. Guerrilla sapper teams then cut the perimeter wire and raced in with satchel charges, blowing up barracks and raking dumbfounded soldiers with automatic weapons, according to survivors.